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Navigating the Unknown Digital "Waters" That Lie Ahead – A Commentary

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Introduction

As the authors of the six articles in this special issue of JCIE demonstrate, there is a growing body of research on the increasing role that social media plays in our personal, professional, and civic lives. As someone who has deliberately limited his engagement with social media, I think I am uniquely positioned to comment on the six articles because although I understand the potential of social media to draw us together, I am also increasingly concerned about its tendency to tear us apart. Like many people, I believe that society has become more divided and polarized, and that social media has contributed to these divisions, but I am also open to learning more about how social media can facilitate community building, particularly during times of uncertainty and complexity. In this commentary, I briefly summarize each of the articles, I raise some of the big questions each presents, and, in the process, I shed some light on what I think are the recurring themes across the articles. By doing so, I hope to encourage all of us to think more deeply about what the authors have written on how social media continues to influence our professional and civic

2024, 19(2), pp. 188-205.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education
Vol. 19, no. 2, 2024, Special Issue
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identities, life inside and outside of classrooms, and how we relate to one another in an increasingly digital world.

The first article written by Jonathan Anuik, "Classroom incivility going viral on social media: One professor's encounters," looks at how social media can contribute to classroom incivility which has traditionally been thought to be confined to the physical classroom. While Anuik's focus is indeed on how incivility can manifest itself in these online spaces, he also challenges us to think about the potential that online spaces have for meaningful learning to occur. Building on a few pivotal experiences he had teaching online during the pandemic, Anuik focuses more on the disruptions to classroom rhythms that can demoralize faculty and students rather than on actual online threats to people's personal safety. He also focuses more on the *unsanctioned* rather than the sanctioned university spaces where online activity can spill over and have a negative effect on teaching and learning and the relationships between professors and their students.

To make sense of his experiences, Anuik introduces us to the work of Boice (1996; 2000) who defines classroom incivility as the "disruption, disturbance, and discomfort" that can result from conflicts between professors and their students immediately before, during, and immediately after class. He cites examples such as arriving late, leaving early, coming unprepared, complaining about assessments, and using course evaluations to vent and write rude and disrespectful comments about their instructors. Of course, these days, students also express their displeasure with professors and their teaching in real time using online platforms such as X rather than waiting for course evaluations at the end of the course. Even though his work predates the online worlds we now inhabit, Anuik believes Boice's

2024, 19(2), pp. 188-205.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education
Vol. 19, no. 2, 2024, Special Issue
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research is still relevant as it focuses on what faculty can do to mitigate, reduce, or even eliminate students' expressions of incivility. Boice argues that it is through compassionate teaching, good preparation, and the encouragement of students that faculty can reduce the potential of incivility in digital times.

Towards the end of his piece, Anuik also raises the issue of how students' posts on social media can sometimes come to the attention of deans and other university administrators and how this can result in tensions between the right of students to express themselves freely and the need for higher education institutions to be concerned about reputational damage, an issue that Yoon and Moore also explore in the next article in this issue. There is a lot at stake when the ideals of a university education (i.e., critical thinking, freedom of expression, etc.) come head-to-head with the imperative that universities be sensitive to the concerns of alumni and donors. In the end, Anuik does acknowledge the promise of social media for providing legitimate venues for meaningful learning but at the same time, he cautions us to attend to the incivilities that can go viral and disrupt the quality of the teaching and learning experience for all.

The second article written by Ee-Seul Yoon and Shannon Moore, "How can academics engage as public intellectuals on social media platforms?: A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of social media guidelines," makes the argument that the social media guidelines and policies of Canadian universities both shape and constrain faculty members' academic freedom and their ability to engage freely in public debates. In making their case, the authors emphasize that their focus is on the *text* of these policies not in their implementation. They cite a lack of clarity in these policies across U15 institutions and the inconsistencies in institutional support

2024, 19(2), pp. 188-205.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education
Vol. 19, no. 2, 2024, Special Issue
DOI: https://doi.org/10.20355/jcie29675

regarding the use of social media by academics. They make the case that power is exercised at the institutional level and that social media has become a "crucial site of academic surveillance." Moreover, they argue that although faculty are protected by academic freedom, they are simultaneously constrained by institutional social media policies.

They then introduce us to Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) which they argue can help us better understand how a body of institutional knowledge (in this case, U15 social media guidelines) can shape and discipline the conduct of individual academics. They highlight three axes, ethics, knowledge, and power, and suggest that these axes are deeply embedded in U15 social media policies that serve to regulate and endorse some behaviours on social media platforms and discourage others. According to the authors, if this practice continues, then academics will be increasingly reluctant to act like the public intellectuals they are expected to be, increasingly reticent to engage in public debates, and ultimately silenced in an environment where academic freedom should be the cornerstone of any credible institutional social media policies. They make the case that they are not "theorizing universities as unitary, top-down entities in relation to academics"; instead, they see academics and their universities as "entangled in complex webs of power relationships" that have now become even more complex with the increasing use of social media. This article raises many important questions for us to consider. For example, 1) Is it always clear where the boundary between the "personal" and the "professional" lies and if so, should academics still be considered employees even after work hours?; 2) Should universities be involved at all in sanctioning what academics post on social media or should academics be free to post whatever they want?; and 3) Are concerns about the academic freedom of faculty members and the

2024, 19(2), pp. 188-205.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education
Vol. 19, no. 2, 2024, Special Issue
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concerns about the reputation of their university necessarily mutually exclusive, as the authors suggest, or is this a false dichotomy? In other words, is there a middle ground where both academic freedom and institutional reputation are acknowledged and respected?

The third article, written by Erika Smith, "Building critical digital literacies for social media through educational development," provides a well-grounded explanation for how critical digital literacies can have a positive impact on educators' learning and development in higher education. Smith begins by making the case that although the use of social media is pervasive in higher education, she remains unconvinced that faculty imbue critical perspectives when they use it or when they encourage their students to use it. As for students, they report that they are not being taught critical digital literacy during their undergraduate programs. Interestingly, students also report that they understand that social media is a double-edged sword—that it can both enhance and hinder learning—and they acknowledge that some voices can overshadow and even block out the voices of others. However, in spite of some of social media's drawbacks, Smith contends that building critical literacy skills through various platforms can help prepare students for civic engagement, which, of course, is fundamental to a university education. Smith continues by showing how critical digital literacies are really an extension of Giroux's (2020) notion of critical pedagogy that attempts to unsettle long-held assumptions, theorize matters of self and social agency, and respond to the challenges and opportunities of living in a democracy. Critical digital literacies then connect to critical pedagogy by promoting empowerment, building social identities, challenging inequities, and questioning underlying ideologies embedded within digital contexts.

Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education
Vol. 19, no. 2, 2024, Special Issue
DOI: https://doi.org/10.20355/jcie29675

Drawing on available research and her own work as an undergraduate educator and educational developer, Smith (2024) dispels the myth that students are intuitive and responsible technology users as some believe them to be. She makes the case that although students appear to be constantly "connected" to their technology, we need to move away from "uncritical stereotypes of students being tech savvy digital natives" (p. 74). Just because they can use the technology, they are not necessarily able to recognize misinformation and disinformation and dismiss fake news when they read it. Given the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation online, it makes intuitive sense that we strengthen the critical thinking skills of students so that they can better navigate digital spaces and look more critically at various forms of visual or multimodal forms of communication such as memes and GIFs.

However, several questions remain. One of those questions is if critical digital literacies are that important, then do all faculty members need to develop their own capacity to teach these essential skills? If *all* faculty members are expected to infuse these skills into the content they are already teaching, then how would we respond to concerns about increasing faculty workloads? Furthermore, how would they make room for the teaching of these literacies when many of their courses are already content "heavy?" Furthermore, how do we ensure that the work of teaching critical digital literacy is recognized as legitimate academic work for tenure and promotion purposes? In other words, although Smith's overall premise makes sense, in my mind, there are still some unanswered questions that need further discussion.

The fourth article, written by Christine Greenhow, Aisel Akhmedova, Jennifer Sutcliffe, Marisa Fisher, and Connie Sung, "Students with and without disabilities

2024, 19(2), pp. 188-205.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education
Vol. 19, no. 2, 2024, Special Issue
DOI: https://doi.org/10.20355/jcie29675

using social media: Relationship benefits and implications for education," presents a comprehensive look at how various groups of students use social media and the benefits that accrue as a result. Greenhow et al. provide an overview of a qualitative study they conducted with undergraduate students, some with disabilities of various kinds and some without. They acknowledge that while much of the existing research tends to focus on the *negative* effects of social media use by university students, their study examines the *benefits* by using a social capital lens. Bonding social capital refers to the inward-looking efforts of individuals to build community and a sense of belonging by being a part of common activities and sharing similar interests. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, refers to the outward-looking efforts of individuals as they connect with others outside of their networks to access new information and resources and to gain new perspectives (see also Hasinoff & Mandzuk, 2005; Mandzuk et al., 2005). On this point, the literature is clear that a healthy balance of bonding and bridging sets the foundation for optimal learning. In fact, the authors make the case that by generating social capital, undergraduate students improve their emotional states, their quality of life, and their sense of belonging, which all lead to greater persistence and graduation rates.

However, they argue that we need to know more about the complexities of social media use and how students faced with different life experiences use various social media platforms. As such, they speak to students with and without disabilities to learn if there are differences in what social media platforms are used by the two groups and what the perceived benefits might be for each. Although there are similarities between the two groups, perhaps most noteworthy is that students with disabilities use social media primarily to connect through entertainment,

2024, 19(2), pp. 188-205.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education
Vol. 19, no. 2, 2024, Special Issue
DOI: https://doi.org/10.20355/jcie29675

expand their community, and help them manage their disabilities by connecting with other students with similar disabilities and with experts in the field. This contribution to the existing literature adds to our understanding of how social media can help students with disabilities develop a sense of belonging and allow them to develop their relationships with others. It also helps instructors think about how they can foster more inclusive interactions within their courses. This seems to be particularly important in light of the alienating experiences that many undergraduates have in their first few years at university. Given that there are increasing numbers of university students who are declaring that they have disabilities and that most universities are struggling with meeting their needs, it is easy to imagine the role that social media platforms might increasingly play in the future.

The fifth article, written by Gemma Porter, "Teachers' identities in the digital age: A cross-provincial analysis of social media guidance for educators," examines how the social media policies of professional organizations and governments intersect with people's notions of what it means to be a "good teacher" in New Brunswick, Ontario, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia. Porter argues that teachers' personal and professional lives are increasingly intertwined, and thanks to social media, they are also under heightened surveillance. She argues that without direct knowledge of their audiences on social media platforms, teachers must *imagine* them, which means that teachers end up engaging in what Erving Goffman (1959) called "self-presentation strategies." Porter then talks about how authentic teacher collaboration can really thrive in online affinity spaces where teachers can be self-directed, community oriented, and gain a sense of belonging, all of which

Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education
Vol. 19, no. 2, 2024, Special Issue
DOI: https://doi.org/10.20355/jcie29675

work against the "one size fits all" approach to most of the professional development that teachers receive.

In spite of these benefits, however, online spaces can also lead to unabashed self-promotion among some and "digital teachers' lounges" among others. And, although she doesn't expand her thinking on this point, I can also see how teachers' online spaces could be places where teachers not only share ideas on a professional basis, but also where they might potentially complain about students and their parents, which is exactly what can happen in *physical* teachers' lounges.

One of the most valuable contributions that Porter makes is when she once again evokes Goffman when analyzing the "performative" and "constructive" aspects of identity development in online spaces. The *performative* aspects occur in public spaces where teachers can manage the impressions that others have of them and the *constructive* aspects are the more passive forms of identity development as teachers engage in more private conversations with other teachers about their teaching practice. These references echo Goffman's dramaturgical theory, which he outlined in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and where he referred to the "front stage" or public-facing spaces and the "backstage" or private spaces that are out of the public eye. Essentially, Porter makes the case, as Goffman did 65 years ago, that our professional identities are crafted in both ways and nowadays, in both physical *and* digital spaces. In fact, she goes one step further to suggest something that Goffman could only imagine: that the evolving and dynamic nature of teacher identity is becoming even more pronounced in digital spaces.

2024, 19(2), pp. 188-205.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education
Vol. 19, no. 2, 2024, Special Issue
DOI: https://doi.org/10.20355/jcie29675

In the final part of the article, Porter offers a critique of the documents that she analyzed with respect to teachers' professional identities. She notes that there is a lack of guidance in these documents on how teachers can construct their professional identities in digital spaces and how to navigate those spaces thoughtfully. Like Erika Smith, she concludes by advocating for critical digital literacy as a core competency for educators and encouraging teachers to take ownership of their online presence in order to foster a sense of autonomy and agency.

The sixth article, written by Rachel Brickner, "What's really at stake? Insights from Nova Scotia teachers' use of social media during collective bargaining," is a thought-provoking piece on the role that social media can play in labour relations; more specifically, how teachers, teachers' unions, and governments use social media differently to try to help the general public better understand multiple perspectives on complex and thorny workplace issues that ultimately affect the quality of teaching and learning. I found Brickner's reference to the "caring economy" to be particularly helpful, as was her perspective that all three parties—the teachers' unions, the government, and teachers themselves—used "care frames" of different kinds to communicate with the public in Nova Scotia from 2015–2017. These care frames differ from the consumer/disruptive frames that governments tend to use when they refer to the disruption that labour disputes can cause for the consumer. I also appreciate the case that Brickner makes about how various social media like blogs can give teachers more of a voice and allow them to work around what she calls "traditional media gatekeepers" such as communications and public relations officers. She argues that during heated and contentious collective bargaining periods, teachers' voices often get forgotten.

2024, 19(2), pp. 188-205.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education
Vol. 19, no. 2, 2024, Special Issue
DOI: https://doi.org/10.20355/jcie29675

Instead, the public hears the government's case for fiscal responsibility and investment in students and the union's perspective on needing to pay attention to teachers' working conditions, but along the way, teachers' own voices can sometimes get lost. By using social media to their advantage, teachers can provide a window into what it feels like in the classroom when, for example, classes are too big to be able to provide individual attention to individual students or when student support is inadequate. In this way, teachers have more agency in making the case themselves on how their working conditions have a direct impact on their ability to care for their students. As Brickner suggests, teachers' social media posts have the potential to add complexity and detail on what life is *really* like in the classroom and how hard teachers are working to care for their students as individual learners.

Brickner reminds us that during labour strife of any kind, it comes down to who controls the narrative and how they control it. With this in mind, it is clear that social media does provide an opportunity for teachers to have their voices heard more forcefully and for their lived classroom experiences to be front and centre during the collective bargaining process. All perspectives are worth hearing, but as is often the case, if we don't hear from those who are most directly affected, then the public really has an incomplete picture of the impact that the outstanding issues have on the learning of children and youth.

Discussion

In this part of my commentary, I identify four overarching themes that I think run across the articles in this special issue and then I follow up by posing four major questions that are designed to stimulate thought so that we might consider some of the issues more deeply.

2024, 19(2), pp. 188-205.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education
Vol. 19, no. 2, 2024, Special Issue
DOI: https://doi.org/10.20355/jcie29675

In terms of overarching themes, I argue that we can think of social media as *sites* or *vehicles* for: 1) civic engagement, 2) community building, 3) social capital generation, and 4) identity development. It is clear from the articles in this issue that social media does enable educators at both the K-12 and higher education levels to play a more active role and develop a greater sense of agency in social and political affairs, particularly during volatile political and social times. As conservative and conservative-leaning governments double down on such issues as book bans, parental rights, and standardized tests, just to name a few, educators at all levels from both ends of the political spectrum are using social media as a platform for *engaging in civic affairs* by either supporting these measures or by pushing back and advocating for more progressive change.

Social media also provides spaces for *building community* and establishing affinity spaces where educators can join other like-minded colleagues who have similar interests and areas of expertise. As has been argued, social media then becomes a vehicle for a more customized and individualized approach to professional development, although one of the drawbacks might be that almost anyone can fashion themselves as a professional development "guru," whether they have the credentials and the expertise or not.

Related to community building, of course, is the role that social media can play in providing sites for *generating social capital*, although I think a word of caution is warranted here. It is easy to think of social capital as an unmitigated good but as mentioned earlier, too much bonding and not enough bridging can become problematic (see Hasinoff & Mandzuk, 2005; Mandzuk et al., 2005). In other words, too much inward-looking activity with like-minded people can easily lead to the

2024, 19(2), pp. 188-205.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education
Vol. 19, no. 2, 2024, Special Issue
DOI: https://doi.org/10.20355/jcie29675

"echo chambers" that can then set the stage for greater polarization in society, a trend I am not sure we want to see grow. While people speaking and listening to others of like mind and life experiences can feel supportive, it can also simply reinforce already accepted ideologies, leading to group think (see Berkowicz & Myer, 2015) and blocking out other perspectives on what are usually complex issues. This is why I would argue that at this particularly volatile and uncertain time, we all need more bridging (either through social media or through more traditional means) so that we are exposed to ideas that do not mirror our own and in the process, we are reminded that there are alternative perspectives on what is going on in the world around us. Having said that, I also acknowledge that there are limits to the alternative perspectives that most of us are open to considering, particularly when they are not based on fact.

Finally, as argued in a number of papers in this issue, social media can support *developing educators' professional and teacher identities*, both their more public or performative efforts and their more private, constructive efforts to do so. For years, as both a professor and an academic administrator, I noticed that an increasing number of educators seemed to spend an increasing amount of time managing their online presence, and I sometimes wondered if they were spending as much time reflecting on how their identities as teachers were changing and the factors that were contributing to those changes.

Based on these main themes, I would like to pose the following overarching questions, related to the use of social media in educational contexts:

2024, 19(2), pp. 188-205.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education
Vol. 19, no. 2, 2024, Special Issue
DOI: https://doi.org/10.20355/jcie29675

1) Whose voices get to be heard and whose do not, and, in the process, who gets to control the narrative?
2) How well do we respect the boundaries between the private and the public and between the personal and professional?
3) Whose responsibility is the teaching of critical digital literacy if we agree that digital natives don't really exist? and,
4) How do we balance personal autonomy with institutional surveillance?

With respect to the first question on *voice*, social media should enable teachers' voices to be heard in ways that they might not be heard otherwise, but just as in physical spaces, sometimes the loudest and most persistent voices drown out the voices of others. When this happens, multiple perspectives on complex issues are not always heard and as a result they are not even considered. This means that educators of all stripes need to monitor how much they are posting and whether they are being as open minded as they like to think they are. They need to ask themselves who is not being invited to the conversation, and whose voices are not being considered. Who is being marginalized simply by not being invited to contribute their ideas? Who is speaking for others without their permission? These are reminders that might be written into institutional policy or organizational guidelines, but it really comes down to individual educators themselves to live up to the standards they expect others to uphold.

With respect to the second question on *boundaries*, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that educators need to acknowledge that social media has a way of blurring the line between the private and the public and between what should remain personal rather than professional. From the perspectives of several of the authors

2024, 19(2), pp. 188-205.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education
Vol. 19, no. 2, 2024, Special Issue
DOI: https://doi.org/10.20355/jcie29675

who have contributed to this issue, we know that educators tend to resist being constrained by institutional policies and organizational guidelines, particularly in higher education where academic freedom is so highly valued. However, one look at the popular media will show that there are plenty of people in both the K-12 and higher education systems who have lost sight of what is appropriate to share and with whom. After all, as Porter has argued, we have to *imagine* who our audience is and given how diverse it likely is, we need to be mindful of what we post. This includes students preparing to be teachers who can often engage in uncivil behaviour while online when they feel they have been "wronged" in some way by their instructors. They need to be mindful that any disrespectful comments posted online can either directly or indirectly spill into the classroom. They also need to keep in mind that as future teachers, the same kind of thing could happen to them so they need to ask themselves how *they* would react in the future if their own students made disrespectful comments about *their* teaching.

With respect to the third question on *critical digital literacy,* it seems to me that learning how to engage with social media in a respectful and informed way is important for anyone wishing to have an online presence, whether they are a student or an educator. They need to learn to examine assumptions they might make, they need to be able to step back and question whether their assumptions are grounded in fact, and they need to consider such things as "tone" and audience. Critical digital literacy skills can also raise people's awareness of how they may be perceived online and whether this is how they wish to be perceived. The lingering question, however, is whose responsibility should it be to teach those skills? Can we really imagine a scenario where we agree that it is the responsibility of *all* educators to teach these skills? If not, what would need to happen to build capacity

2024, 19(2), pp. 188-205.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education
Vol. 19, no. 2, 2024, Special Issue
DOI: https://doi.org/10.20355/jcie29675

so that more faculty members were able and willing to teach critical digital literacy skills? Furthermore, how would we respond to potential concerns about workload, and claims that universities are once again offloading more work onto faculty members? Questions like these remind us that it is one thing to argue for the teaching of critical digital literacy, but it is quite another thing to agree on who should do the teaching and how it should be valued.

Finally, a question that permeates the previous three questions addresses the tension between *personal autonomy and institutional oversight* when it comes to engaging with social media. One perspective is that we should trust all educators to know the difference between what is appropriate and what is not, but there are plenty of well-documented cases where educators have clearly fallen short, and the result has been universal outrage. It turns out that the boundaries between educators' private and public lives are not always clear, and that is why problems continue to emerge. That is why, I would argue, some degree of institutional oversight will always be needed. However, how that kind of oversight is balanced with personal autonomy is still our greatest challenge.

Another perspective is that whether you are a teacher in the K-12 system or a professor in the academy, you both have an employer, someone who pays you reasonably well, and all they ask is that you engage with social media in a responsible way and to the degree possible, you refrain from posting comments that might reflect negatively on the institution. I understand and respect the concerns about academic freedom but as a former academic administrator with decades of experience, I don't think it is unreasonable to consider issues such as reputational damage. Donors and alumni provide much needed support for many

2024, 19(2), pp. 188-205.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education
Vol. 19, no. 2, 2024, Special Issue
DOI: https://doi.org/10.20355/jcie29675

faculties which, in turn, benefit individual professors, the programs they run and the research they conduct. I realize that there will be many who will not share my view, but I do think it is possible to critique institutional policy and practice and do it in a way that is respectful and instructive. Therefore, I think that personal autonomy and institutional oversight *can* and perhaps *should* co-exist and that any institutional or organizational policies and guidelines should consider how they might strike a balance between the two.

Conclusion

As someone who decided long ago to limit his engagement with social media, the articles included in this special issue of the *JCIE* have really opened my mind and made me re-consider whether I might engage online more than I have in the past. As a digital immigrant who did not grow up with social media, I can certainly see the benefits that have been so effectively outlined by the authors. However, I also continue to see the pitfalls even more clearly and understand how some educators engage with social media at their own peril. In the end, it is clear that social media and the digital age are here to stay. It is up to us, as individual educators, to find ways to be our authentic selves, to mark how our professional identities evolve over time, and to always be conscious of those whose voices and perspectives are not being heard. Only in this way can we navigate the unknown digital "waters" that lie ahead.

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2024, 19(2), pp. 188-205.

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